

Facebook hires former British Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg

By Joe Mount
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Facebook's decision to appoint former British Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg as its vice-president of Global Affairs and Communications epitomises the integration of the social media giants and the capitalist state apparatus in every country.

After reportedly extensive discussions with Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg, Clegg claimed to be impressed by the company's recognition that it "is on a journey which brings new responsibilities not only to the users of Facebook's apps but to society at large. I hope I will be able to play a role in helping to navigate that journey."

These "responsibilities" involve a stepping up of internet censorship as part of the efforts of the ruling elite in every country to suppress working-class resistance to austerity, militarism and war.

Clegg led the Liberal Democrats party into coalition government with Prime Minister David Cameron's Conservatives between 2010 and 2015. He is mainly remembered for betraying his party's pledges of opposition to tuition fees that were instead trebled under the coalition. This was part of a savage increase in austerity measures that created the conditions for last year's Grenfell fire disaster, which cost the lives of 72 people. It was the Tory/Lib Dem coalition, with Clegg as deputy prime minister, that backed the 2011 war on Libya, which devastated that country, and it was under Clegg that WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange was forced to seek asylum in the Ecuadorian embassy in London.

The Liberal Democrats' vote base collapsed as a result. In place of being a stooge of private capital in government office, Clegg is now hawking out his tattered liberal credentials to one of the wealthiest corporations in the world. In return for a reported £4 million per year, he joins a long line of ex-government figures to use their influence to get rich in the private sector. Former Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair has made tens of millions through "consulting" with the likes of the murderous Saudi dictatorship, with whom he has a £9 million deal to advise on its "modernisation."

Clegg joins Facebook at a time when it is censoring socialist, left-wing and oppositional web sites, including the closure of hundreds of such sites over the last several weeks. In addition to legitimising this clampdown, Clegg's role will be to help ensure the tech giant avoids or minimises any encroachment on its commercial interests as the American corporation comes under pressure from Brussels, where Clegg enjoys considerable connections from his period as a Member of the European Parliament from 1999-2004.

Last year, the European Commission imposed a €110 million fine on Facebook for business malpractice regarding the firm's takeover of WhatsApp. Rising trade tensions between the US and the European Union (EU) mean the political and financial stakes are now much larger.

The EU recently announced plans to step up internet censorship to tackle "disinformation" that may affect the outcome of next year's European election campaign. Clegg will now have the opportunity to perform another U-turn, this time on the issue of tax avoidance, following his critical remarks against such practices by major firms. Facebook paid a miserly £7.4 million in corporation tax in the UK last year, despite quadrupling profits.

Clegg has positively endorsed the collaboration of tech companies with the state, arguing, "If the tech industry can work sensibly with governments, regulators, parliaments and civic society around the world, I believe we can enhance the benefits of technology while diminishing the often-unintended downsides."

Though he is the most senior British politician to join the management of a major tech company, Clegg is not the first. Fellow Liberal Democrat Lord Allan of Hallam joined Facebook as Director of Policy in Europe in 2009. In the US, the notorious war criminals Condoleezza Rice and Colin Powell were hired by Dropbox and Salesforce in 2014 and in 2003 former US vice president Al Gore joined the board of directors of Apple Inc.

Facebook faced major privacy concerns following the mass data leak involving Cambridge Analytica, a company linked to President Donald Trump, which harvested the data

of millions of Facebook users. Cambridge Analytica originated in British deep-state “psychological operations,” earning millions of pounds via government contracts and developing greater involvement in propaganda exercises targeting populations around the world.

The issue was elevated to prominence by liberal media outlets such as the *Guardian* and *New York Times* and, in March, Zuckerberg was pressured to testify before the US Congress. The British government fined Facebook £500,000 (US\$560,415), the maximum penalty, following the scandal. Notwithstanding official criticisms, such abuses have been used to ensure compliance with demands for increased state surveillance. Bogus claims that “fake news” spread via social media is facilitating “Russian meddling” in elections in the West has become an axiom of official debate, adopted by conservative and liberal factions of the bourgeoisie alike to demand the censorship of free speech.

Clegg’s appointment was endorsed by Labour’s deputy leader Tom Watson, who claimed fatuously, “I look forward to meeting Nick Clegg in his new role, as we have serious concerns about Facebook’s lack of democratic accountability. He will know our concerns about data privacy, taxation and transparency. He will also be acutely aware that there are very serious questions about the role the company played during the EU referendum that the [Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport] select committee still requires answers to.”

Facebook has enthusiastically collaborated in government-coordinated political blacklisting. Zuckerberg announced his intention to submit to government pressure last year with stepped-up use of artificial intelligence and human staff to intervene in the activity on its platform. Citing “interference from nation states” and the “spread of news that is false, sensational and polarizing,” Facebook had the responsibility to “amplify the good and prevent harm,” he wrote.

The *World Socialist Web Site* drew attention to the scale and target of internet censorship in 2017 after it identified the systematic rigging of search results by Google in order to make left-wing and anti-war websites harder to find. Social media is becoming a major battlefield of the class struggle.

Facebook’s control of the world’s largest platform, along with other services such as WhatsApp and Instagram—that are more popular among youth—gives it a unique role in facilitating public debate. But it is just one of the monopolistic corporations that dominate internet news, search and social networking and which have a working division of labour with governments. While these companies initially adopted a politically neutral and “techno-utopian” stance, typified by Google’s motto “Don’t be evil,” they

have become willing tools and partners of the most reactionary and militaristic forces, particularly in the US.

The tech giants are collaborating in efforts to criminalise political opposition and suppress free speech, functioning as the “trusted gatekeepers” for governments and ensuring the “correct” interpretation of world events—i.e., spreading real fake news. Under capitalism, the progressive international possibilities of communication technology are being used instead as a tool for state surveillance, dictatorship, private profit and war.

In January, the International Editorial Board of the *World Socialist Web Site* issued an open letter to socialist, anti-war, left-wing and progressive websites, organisations and activists calling for an international coalition to fight internet censorship.

Emphasising that the defence of democratic rights required the mobilisation of the international working class, it stressed, “It is critical to establish an understanding in the working class of the inseparable connection between the defense of their class interests, their living standards, working conditions, wages, etc., and the fight for democratic rights. Without access to alternative news and social media, workers in different countries will not be able to effectively coordinate their common struggles.

“Unfettered access to the Internet will facilitate the international unity of the working class in the global fight for socialism, democracy and equality. The *World Socialist Web Site* is convinced that the struggle against internet censorship, as a critical component of the defense of democratic rights, will be enthusiastically supported by the working class. This is their fight. It is not simply that the involvement of the working class is important in order to defend free speech. Rather, the fight to defend free speech is important for the working class.”

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